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SUBJECT: Latvia to hold two signature drives in 30 days

11. Summary. Two unrelated legislative amendments - constitutional amendments providing the rights to dismiss Saeima through a national referendum and amendments setting the level of a minimum pension at the official subsistence level - proposed by private groups have succeeded in collecting the required number of signatures (10,000) necessary to force the government to launch national signature drives on the proposals. If signature drives are successful (149,064 Latvian citizens have to sign for each proposal) the proposed amendments will be forwarded to Saeima. If Saeima fails to enact the proposals, the proposed amendments will be put on national referenda. The signature drives will run for 30 days and finish on April 15. End summary.

Draft Constitutional amendments

12. Constitutional amendments providing the public the right to initiate a process to dismiss the Saeima (currently, only the President can initiate Saeima's dismissal through national referendum) were developed by the Latvian Free Trade Union (LBAS) in response to the way the former government headed by Aigars Kalvitis (People's Party - TP) developed and adopted the 2008 state budget in October last year. LBAS announced that the then-government failed to fulfill the given promises regarding public sector employees' wages. "These amendments to the Constitution will eradicate from the country the politicians' tradition of thinking about the people only once every four years -- before elections," said chairman of the labor confederation Peteris Krigers. "And this will undoubtedly expand citizens' chances of more tightly controlling members of parliament, thereby guaranteeing a stronger civic society." Though the Kalvitis' government stepped down after the state budget was adopted, LBAS continued collection of signatures required for launching the signature drive.

13. In general, LBAS's proposal has received positive evaluations as expanding the scope of democratic rights of the people through direct political participation. However, some political experts warn of possible abuse, which could result in never-ending signature drives on Saeima's dismissal. Former President Vike-Freiberga has also expressed concern about the amendments.

14. Stances of political forces are divided along the lines of their position in the current Saeima: all opposition parties support the draft amendments and one of the biggest, New Era (JL), is planning to get involved in a promotion campaign. Most of the parties in the ruling coalition are against the draft amendments. The head of the government Ivars Godmanis (LPP/LC) believes that "[O]ur Constitution has been drafted in a very thorough and balanced manner [and should not be changed]" and will not participate in the signature drive. His party (LPP/LC) and TP members are also against the proposed amendments. However, a leader of another coalition party, the Union of the Greens and Farmers (ZZS), Augusts Brigmanis announced that he supports the constitutional amendments proposed by LBAS.

15. The response of ordinary citizens to the amendments is unclear. Though the government popularity ratings remain very low and the recent poll reveals that 28 percent of respondents claimed that they would sign for the draft amendments to the Constitution providing popular rights to dismiss Saeima, according to the data of Central Election Committee, only 20,681 citizens (about 13 percent of the required number) have signed over the first week of the signature drive. (Note: Traditionally, there is a surge in signatures in the final week of a collection drive. End note.)

Draft amendments on the Law on Retirement Pensions

¶6. A separate, but parallel signature collection effort is taking place on proposed amendments to the Law on Retirement Pensions that would ensure that all pensions are at least at the level of the official subsistence (poverty) level. Currently, a third of all pensioners, receive less than 100 lats (aprox. 220 USD) a month and the poverty line is officially about 130 lats (aprox. 285 USD) a month. The process was initiated by the Union of Pensioners last year, however, the remaining number of signatures necessary to qualify for the signature drive was collected in February this year when recently formed political force "Cita politika" (headed by former People's Party ministers Aigars Stokenbergs and Artis Pabriks announced that "poverty is the major issue in the country" and supported the petition drive.

¶7. The proposed draft amendments are seen as ensuring a rise in the Pabriks/Stokenbergs party's poll numbers, but experts note that the proposal as drafted would provide only a short-term solution for pensioners' economic situation. The draft amendments are not supported by the ruling coalition. The other opposition parties have not clearly voiced their support for or opposition to the proposed amendments. Theoretically the authors of the proposal could count on the support of Latvia's pensioners, which constitute almost 28 percent of the total population.

¶8. Comments. Though there is no direct relation between the content of the two proposed amendments, both attempts are aimed at changing current key players in the political arena. New emerging political and social forces are using democratic, but rarely used, methods to find and strengthen their positions in the political market. However, the chances of success are rather low. Even though Latvian citizens claim to support the proposed amendments, most likely they will not participate in the signature drives, which come over the holiday period, because they feel deeply disillusioned in politics and their ability to influence political processes. If the necessary

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signatures are collected, the possibility that either of the proposals would actually be adopted is even smaller since a majority in Saeima has said that they would not support the proposals and the standards for passage at a referendum are quite high.

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